COMMUNICATION

Employer Expectations and Quality Assurance in Open University of Sri Lanka Programmes

CHANDRA GUNAWARDENA
Open University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka

Abstract : *Universities are expected to assist in the creation and dissemination of qualitative knowledge and skills. Despite the increasing enrolment in higher education it has not been able to meet the expectations of the employers. Employers continuously look for better aptitudes in the employees to perform the job efficiently. This paper identifies several qualities for the development of the total personality which ultimately make students successful job performer. It highlights the initiatives taken by the Open University of Sri Lanka in improving the quality of its graduates. The concept of broad range of skills has been elaborated. It has been focused that appropriate teaching/ learning process is required to inculcate these skills in learners.*

Introduction

Universities are expected to train an intellectual elite and provide the basis for a technological society and are also considered to be the most important institutions with a widespread impact on culture, politics and ideology. They are expected to assist in the creation and especially in the dissemination of knowledge.

Recent decades have, however, witnessed a sense of increasing disillusionment with the ability of the universities to perform the above tasks. The revolution in rising expectations had resulted in a tremendous expansion of secondary education leading to increased enrolment in universities. In Sri Lanka too, university enrolment increased more than three-fold from 4,127 in 1960 to 14,260 in 1965. In the latter half of the 1960s though, the objective of providing higher education to all who desired it, seemed to have given way to a reduction of admissions. This reduction had been caused more by the inadequacy of facilities than by the grim prospect of graduate unemployment. Yet the government found it difficult to absorb the large numbers of graduates, especially the arts graduates into public sector employment, as it had done so far.

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During the early 1970s, 'vocationalism in education' gained acceptance and the Seer's Report (1971) argued for a closer relationship between education and employment. The Committee on Reorganization of Higher Education (Jayaratne Committee, 1971) made the radical recommendation of introducing job-oriented courses at university level. A tracer study (Gunawardena, 1980) of graduates who graduated in 1976 has indicated that the introduction of job-oriented courses had not achieved the expected objective. In the years that followed, the universities themselves have decreased the intake for job-oriented courses and have increased the admissions to Science-based courses at the expense of Arts-oriented courses. Even though the spectre of unemployed university graduates is a result of a constricted labour market in a stagnant or sluggish economy, the phenomenon has stirred Sri Lanka, as has been done by other countries, to reflect on the quality of the products of the university system.

Employer Expectations from University Graduates

Increasing interest has been focussed in recent years in using the views of stakeholders to access the quality of higher education in relation to the needs of the employment market. In the case of university education, the stakeholders are the employers, the students and the teachers. Of these, employers are considered as a significant group who perform a critical role in assessing the quality of graduates in recruiting them for employment.

Most of the UK studies report that more than specialized knowledge, other types of skills are being valued by employers. Thus CIHE (1987) argued that British Industry and Commerce needs "versatile and adaptable" graduates if it is to develop and remain competitive into the next century. There is also emphasis on 'transferable skills such as communication skills and team working (Coldstream, 1991). Stobbart (1991) stated 'we recognize that we need graduates with more broad-based skills of analysis and creativity, numeracy and literacy; adaptability, motivation and leadership'. In a recent HMI (1991b) study of 52 companies, good communication skills were also viewed as an essential attribute of graduates by 90 per cent of the respondents. While effective communication skills were at the top of the list of qualities, use of information technology was seen as relatively unimportant. Harvey et al. (1992) in the QHE study found interpersonal skills (communication, team work), problem-solving, adaptability, (self-confidence, self-management), decision making and independent judgement rated higher than the knowledge and skills that characterize the traditional approach to higher education, that is, specialist subject knowledge, imagination and creativity, enquiry and research skills and the ability to relate into a wider context. Other qualities employers liked to see in graduates included humanity, integrity, loyalty, dependability, tact, sensitivity, cooperation, passion, enthusiasm, stamina, determination, tenacity, persistence, consideration for others, innovation, leadership potential, and organization skills, time management, negotiation skills, commercial awareness, practical experience, desire to achieve and personality.

In Sri Lanka, Gunawadena et al (1991) in their study of survey of employers (of university graduates) found that communication skills emerged at the top with almost 37 per cent of the employers specifying these skills. The four characteristics next ranked highest were appearance, grooming, manners (31 per cent), interpersonal skills/ability to work in a team/concern for others (29 per cent) and leadership (27 per cent). Special skills for the job ranked as ninth in the list. The rest of the abilities/skills specified were a close echo of those mentioned in the QHE study. The employers also stressed the need for prospective employees to be competent in English. The percentage of employers who held this view ranged from 66.7 in the government sector to 89.6 in the private sector. It seemed clear that in distinguishing recruits from rejects, the employers tended to look at what graduates lack rather than what they possess. On the whole, studies of employer expectations indicate the increasing emphasis placed on general transferable skills (e.g. problem-solving, adaptability, decision-making ability), communication skills, social skills and proficiency in an international language by employers, when recruiting graduates for employment.

Raheem and Gunasekera (1994) probing into the link between English competency and employment also confirmed that employers surveyed by them placed stress on similar skills and abilities. They reported that the opinion amongst employers was strong to make English the working language of both the private and public sectors at higher levels. A majority of them linked English with confidence and leadership qualities. The problem of 'social etiquette' was also highlighted. It was even argued that without English an individual cannot be professionally qualified.

A more recent study (Vidanapathirana, 1997) reiterated the findings of the earlier studies. The employers in this sample had identified as desirable :

1. a high level of English language skills,
2. a greater exposure to aspects of general management like inter-personal relations, managing people, time and their performance, problem-solving,
3. need for computer skills, and
4. appearance, self-confidence, personality, demeanour and etiquette.

OUSL Initiatives in Improving Quality of its Graduates

As Open Universities, in general, provide a higher education to a more mature, adult clientele and a considerable population of their students may be employed at the time of their entry, the question of employability does not loom as large as in the case of conventional universities. Yet on graduation, even Open University graduates would view their degrees as a passport to better jobs and social mobility and, therefore, employer expectations do become relevant even for them.

It is generally believed that the competencies desired by employers are more easily developed through face-to-face contact sessions and therefore, the Open Universities face greater challenges. Our study of the different programmes, offered by the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) reveal that even though it encounters

difficulties, it has striven to enhance the quality of its products by making use of processes of teaching and learning that facilitate the development of the desired competencies.

Information for this paper were collected from the Heads of Departments and the Training Engineer of the Faculty of Engineering through interviews. The analysis is presented under the four broad categories of specific skills for the professions related to university education, general transferable skills, communication skills including English language skills and social skills.

Sensitivity to employer expectations

Three Department of Study reported that in designing, and re-structuring programmes, they had striven to find out what employers expect from the graduates produced by them and how to meet these expectations.

The Department of Language Studies which had been conducting the Certificate Programme in Professional English had re-structured the programme in accordance with the finding from an employer survey. The Department of Social Studies had also identified the courses for the B.A. Degree in Social Sciences after a similar survey. Thus unlike in the other degree programmes which stipulate the completion of Part II of the English course as a requirement for the award of the degree, in the B.A., English is a mainstream course, and the students need to complete Part II before they can proceed from level 4 to level 5. Within the other courses of Sociology, Economics and Mass Communication also, relevance has been a major criterion. Components such as Agricultural Economics, Development Economics, Community Development, Applied Sociology, Legal Perspectives of Mass Communication, Mass Media Research and Environmental Journalism have been included.

The Management Studies Department has obtained the participation of employer representatives in the course team which decide on course development. Thus for each of the courses of the Bachelor of Management Degree Programme, of the four course team members, two are consultants from the industry. This enables a balance of theory and practice to be achieved.

Specific skills for profession

In all OUSL programmes, in addition to the implementation of theoretical knowledge in respective disciplines, development of special skills which may facilitate employment has also been given importance. These skills are developed through basic workshop practice and specific training in the case of the Faculty of Engineering Technology, practical work in the Faculty of Science, practice teaching in the Department of Education, Case Study in the Department of Management and project work in all three Faculties.

Basic workshop practice

In the Engineering Faculty, Basic Workshop Practice of 21 days' duration is conducted in the Mechanical Engineering Workshop. Workshop practice is related to the aspects of lathe, nut and bolt, measuring can, liquid measuring can, oxy-acetylene welding, electric arc welding, soldering, fluorescent lamp and

house-wiring. In each of the above aspects, ten elements are evaluated. The performance is graded under the three categories of :

i. attitude of work

ii. knowledge of work and

iii. vocational skills

On-the-job practical training

(a) Specific training in engineering faculty programmes

Specific Training is organized in 2 blocks of 3-1/2 months each in levels 3 and 4 of the Diploma in Technology programme (the first phase of the Engineering Degree). Students undergo this training in identified workplaces. If a student is employed in the field in an acceptable capacity, this experience is considered in lieu of training but he/she has to face the interview and the assessment like the others.

Specific training is available in any of the six areas of civil, mechanical, textile, agricultural, electrical and electronic technology. Guidelines given to students specify the standards related to different areas of work and functions and the number of weeks that a student should devote to each. For example, in Civil Technology, a total of 52 skills have been listed.

(b) Practical teaching

Bachelor of Education (Natural Sciences) programme has made 10 weeks of teaching practice in a school compulsory for the students. The students apply the theoretical knowledge they have gained on lesson planning, principles of education, educational sociology and psychology, evaluation and methods of teaching in practical situations and gain the practical skills of teaching, design and use of audio-visual aids.

Field work

Some programmes such as the Bachelor of Engineering, use field-work to develop specific skills needed for their profession. For example, in Surveying, a Survey Camp of 10-14 days is compulsory. All students accompanied by staff participate in this residential camp and work groups.

Project work

All degree programmes, except the B.A. degree programme in Social Sciences, have a project component. The Engineering undergraduates complete a project at level 6. It is a home assignment conducted in the community and need not necessarily be a research project. In the case of the Bachelor of Laws degree also, at level 6 the students have to complete a project in Jurisprudence, which enables them to get an understanding of the practical side of the law. Each student is assigned to a practising lawyer and is expected to follow a case for nine months and to participate in consultations, court hearings, and talk to clients. They submit a report giving the facts of the case and attempt a legal analysis as to whether the law is adequate and effective and whether access to justice is ensured. The student in this manner realizes that there may be several explanations of the law and is able to make a critical analysis of likely consequences.

In the Bachelor of Nursing, the project at level 6 entails the students to identify an issue in the area, and study it at depth, find a solution, implement it and give the feedback on the effectiveness of the solution. The project is compulsory. In addition, in all courses of the programme, in place of the normal written test for continuous assessment, a practical assignment has to be completed. These assignments are also designed to develop skills, for example, how the patients can be assessed, with the consultant physician certifying the level of skill acquired.

In the Diploma in Management Programme (the first stage of the Bachelor of Management Studies Degree), students, undertake a research-oriented project on an organizational problem, while the students in the Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management Certificate Programme, conduct a feasibility study on how to set up a business or improve the existing one.

The Bachelor of Science Programme includes a project at level 5, but only about 5-8 students per discipline (e.g. Physics, or Chemistry) are selected on their level of prior achievement due to staff constraints. In the B.Sc. Joint Major programme (a four-year special degree) and the Bachelor of Education (Natural Sciences) projects are compulsory at level 6.

Practical experiments

Practical experimentation is an important component in all the three programmes of Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Education (Natural Science) and Bachelor of Nursing. The students engage in practical work individually as well as in groups. Each course has 15-30 hours of practical work which helps to develop skills of handling apparatus, recording, analysis and scientific writing.

Case study

In the Management Studies Programmes, actual and hypothetical problems are presented to students as case studies. Students analyze the facts presented in case studies in groups, look for evidence to support and justify their arguments and arrive at solutions to the problems.

General transferable skills

As has been pointed out by previous studies on Quality in Higher Education, general transferable skills include a broad range of skills such as inter-personal skills, problem-solving, adaptability, decision making, independent judgement, organizational skills, persistence, alertness and concentration.

The Heads of Departments interviewed by us pointed out that the principles of distance education demand the development of some of these skills in students if they are to successfully complete the programmes of their choice. Being adults, who are mostly in employment and shouldering added family responsibilities, OUSL students are called upon to adapt themselves to the new role of being students. The fact that the main-modes of delivery are print and audio-visual materials, rather than face-to-face teaching which necessitate active and independent learning. This promotes the development of the skills specified above.

It is noteworthy, however, that these skills are developed mainly through the selection of appropriate teaching/learning processes rather than through content. Our interviewees stressed on this fact when they identified that the programme components already listed under specific skills were effective in bringing about a perceivable improvement in the development of general transferable skills. An attempt has been made below to categorize the transferable skills mentioned by the Heads in their discussion of different programme.

Components	General Transferable Skills
1. Basic workshop practice	Time management/General attitude to workshop Attitude to work Use and care of tools/equipment Neatness Quality of work
2. Specific Training and Field work	Organizational skills Inter-personal relations Sensitivity to community issue Team work Problem-solving
3. Practical Training and Practical Work	Problem-solving Management skills Analytical thinking Decision making Observation skills Consideration for others Attitude to work Attitude to Profession Accuracy Neatness
4. Project work	Problem solving Critical thinking Analytical thinking Decision making Observation skills Inter-personal skills Consideration for others Organizational skills Sensitivity to community issues
5. Case study	Initiative Team work Analytical skills Problem solving Decision making

Communication skills

Development of communication skills is the special focus of the programmes conducted by the Language Studies Department. The Department offers programmes in four languages — English, Sinhala, Tamil and Korean. At present, Sinhala for Tamil-speaking persons, Tamil for Sinhala speaking persons, and Korean are provided only at the Beginners' level and attempt is made to develop the four basic skills in these languages in those who require these skills for general, practical or social purposes.

There are two programmes in English language : English for Academic Purposes and Professional English. The former is geared to improve the language skills of students who are enrolled in academic programmes such as Engineering, Science, Law, Social Sciences, Management, Nursing and Education. These courses are specifically oriented towards the particular disciplines. It is mandatory for the students to complete the courses for award of the degree.

The second programme, the Certificate in Basic English/Professional English, focuses on the development of language skills to enable the students to function in English, especially in their places of work.

It is pertinent to note the techniques used in developing communication skills in the Basic English and the Professional English Programmes. In addition to printed material, students are supplied with AV material and further supplemented with weekly Day Schools. Day Schools focus on all four language skills, and these skills are evaluated both at Continuous Assessment and Final Examination. The Final Examination includes an oral test. Audio and video material have been developed to improve speech and listening skills. Skills which are normally required for day-to-day functioning such as introducing themselves, telephone skills, and specific skills such as appearing for an interview or office skills are developed. In writing, aspects covered include basic skills like writing formal and informal letters to report writing.

On the whole, OUSL programmes have been developed on the premise that competency in English is a basic requirement for the acquisition of knowledge in any discipline at the level of higher education and in attempting to fulfil this requirement, the university has also been able to meet employer expectations.

There is also a concern about the competency in communication, not only in English but even in the local languages. A mechanism which has been effective in developing communication and presentation skills, whatever the medium used in the seminar. All the programmes which include a project component stipulate the participation of students at a staff-student seminar. The number of seminars in each programme, however, is seen to vary.

In the degree programmes in Law (LLB.) and Education (B.Ed.) an oral presentation at a seminar is required at level 5 in the former and at level 6 in the latter. In the degree programme in Science (B.Sc.) there are two seminars, one at the proposal stage and the second at the final stage. The Bachelor of Engineering Programme (B.Eng.) stipulate three seminar presentations at proposal, work-in-progress and final stages.

Participation in seminar enable students to improve their communication and presentation skills and also specific skills related to the use of equipment such as blackboard and overhead projector. They also develop inter-personal skills, self-confidence, ability to receive and respond to criticism and to benefit from peer learning.

Social skills

While the employers disparage the lack of social skills in the graduates they screen for employment, whether the development of social skills should be an aspect on which the universities should focus on, is a controversial issue among the academia. It has been pointed out that the 'fortunate few' who imbibe the 'social learning' valuable for personal development from their home backgrounds easily find their way into those schools where 'total development' is an explicitly goal (Gunawardena, 1997). One of the Heads of Departments in OUSL, in fact, vehemently declared that quality in higher education should not be linked to employer expectations and that the university academics had a duty to define 'quality' and educate the employers as to what they should expect if they want to tap the full potential of the human resources available in the country.

It is possible that the heterogeneity of the student population allows for a certain amount of mixing up and consequently opportunities for gaining social skills. No concrete measures appear to have been introduced in the study programmes to achieve this objective except in the case of the Bachelor of Nursing programme. The staff of the Department were reported as advising and constantly monitoring students to instill understanding of the social skills they need to acquire to perform effectively as members of the profession.

Option for the Future

The above discussion points out three strategies that have been adopted by OUSL to produce graduates who are employable in the labour market. These are :

1. surveys of employer expectations to indicate directions regarding design of programmes of study,
2. involvement of employers in curriculum development teams, and
3. selection of appropriate mechanisms to ensure the achievement of objectives derived from employer surveys and incorporated in the programmes. Of these strategies the third merits scrutiny, in view of the fact that some of these mechanisms, that is, the delivery modes such as workshop practice, practical work, specific training and seminars are basically face-to-face interactions between staff and students or students and personnel, which necessitate the presence of students in the campus or workshops.

Viewed from the point of view of students, these modes of delivery, though valuable to them in terms of the benefits accruing in respect of employability would still pose problems in their status as distant learners who are already employed and having families.

It is also noteworthy that project work and con-commitant seminars could be most effective if the staff-student ratio is low and therefore, would be costly in terms of staff time. More use of and better use of Audio-video media could undoubtedly buttress the above efforts, especially in developing communication skills.

Initiatives taken by OUSL to gear the quality of its education to the needs of the employment market, however, need to be evaluated in order to test their effectiveness. Tracer studies which follow up the career paths of OUSL graduates in respect of their success in obtaining employment, or in improving their career prospects such as remuneration or prestige, are required to evaluate the success of these initiatives.

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[**Professor Chandra Gunawardena** is Dean, School of Education. *Correspondence:* Open University of Sri Lanka]